

Superheroes of Community Service

Book 3

Thinking Globally,
Acting Locally



Learning how to fish is all that I wanted

By
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To women who want to live a
life of freedom, dignity, and prosperity


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I am hoping you can share with me another example of the poor rising above the poverty level?




Yes, let me narrate the story of a rural woman from here in the Sindh province of Pakistan. She embodies the results of a Chinese proverb; "If someone is hungry don't give her/him a fish, teach her/him how to fish".



Someone taught her how to fish?

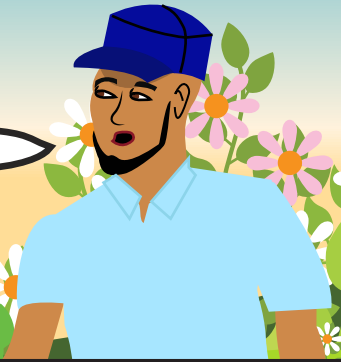


In a manner of speaking. The pond here means the market, and the fish is the income generating activity, which is also called micro business, or micro enterprise.



However, let's start at the beginning of Mahnaz Mahar's story.

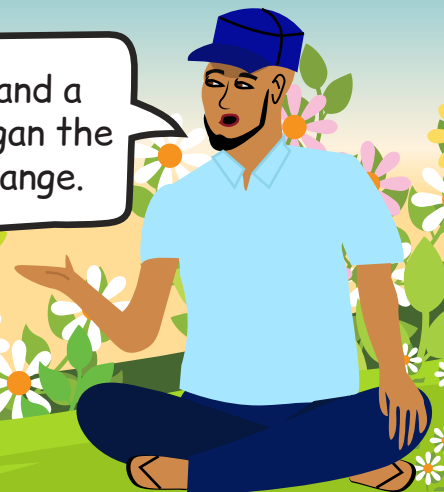
Mahnaz belonged to a very poor farming family. Men as well as women were not educated, so they could not find well paying jobs. Women were also not allowed to go out of the home and work, due to the long-standing local custom.



How did the change begin?



An accident and a coincidence began the process of change.

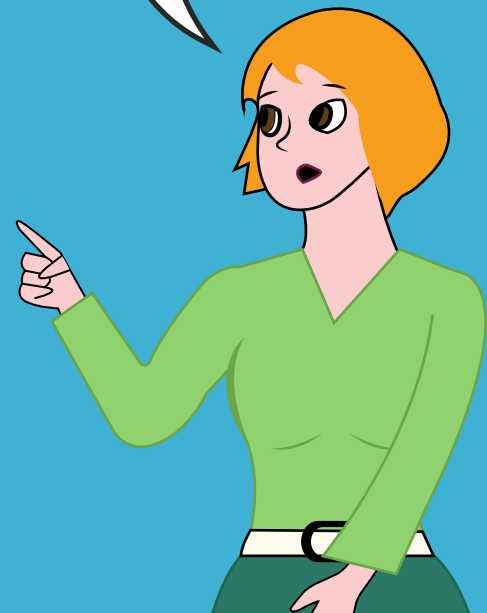




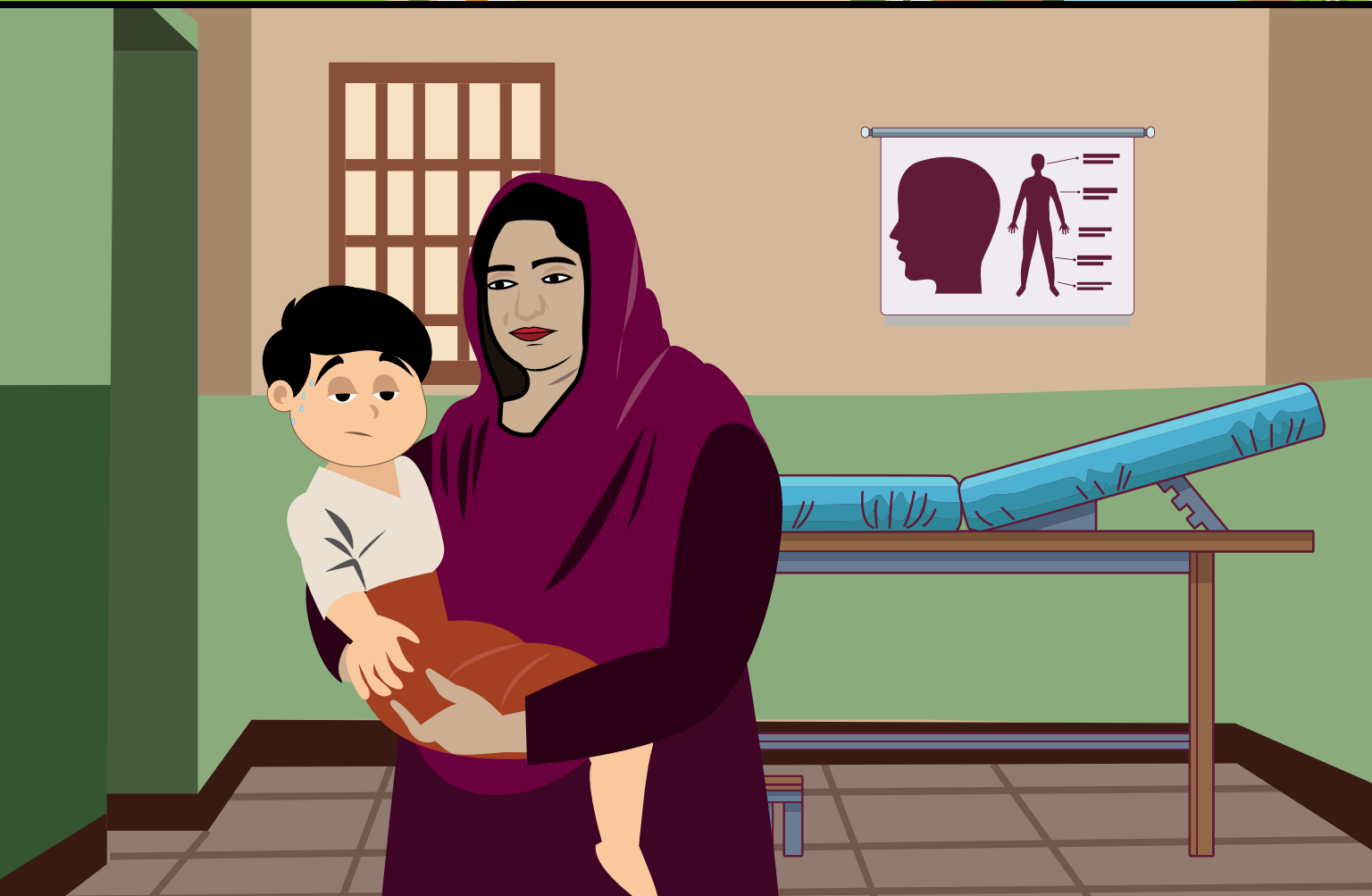
Mahnaz had two sons, one was 6 years old and the other was 1 year old. One of her sons got sick. She was told to go and see a local private doctor. At that time she didn't even know that she could get treatment from a nearby government hospital free of charge.



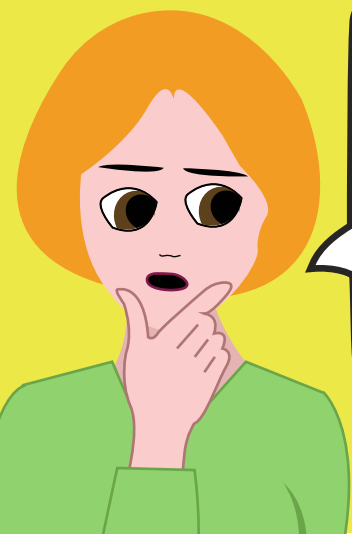
Perhaps the government hospital was one of the "ghost" hospitals.



Perhaps. So Mahnaz took her son to the local doctor who demanded a fee of Rs. 300, approximately 4 US dollars. A family just above the poverty level only earns 2 US dollars per day. So this was twice the entire family's budget for a day.

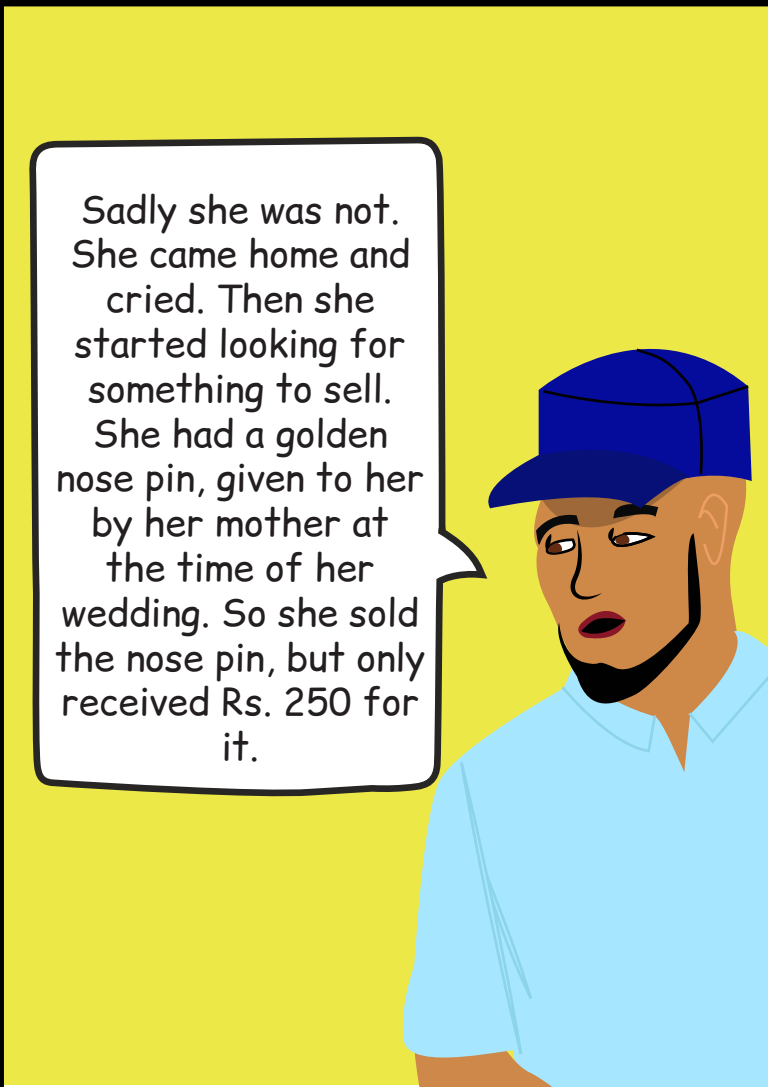



I am thinking that Mahnaz's family was below the poverty level, so it would have been even more difficult for them.




You are right, Mahnaz was running from pillar to post trying to borrow money for her son's treatment.









Oh my. It must be have been very stressful.



Yes, she got a cheaper medicine, but it didn't help. Tragically, the next day her little son died. She was heart broken. It took her time to accept that her little boy was no more.



It appeared to be a most desperate and helpless situation.




In her grief she decided she will not seek help from anyone in the future. She resolved to find a solution for her helplessness herself. She prayed to God, asking to be shown a way to help her family, and other people in need.




I am very eager to hear what unfolded.

This is where a coincidence happened. A rural development organization attempted to work towards uplifting poor rural women in Mahnaz's village. However no one allowed the team of the NGO Sindh Rural Support Organization (SRSO) to enter the village.

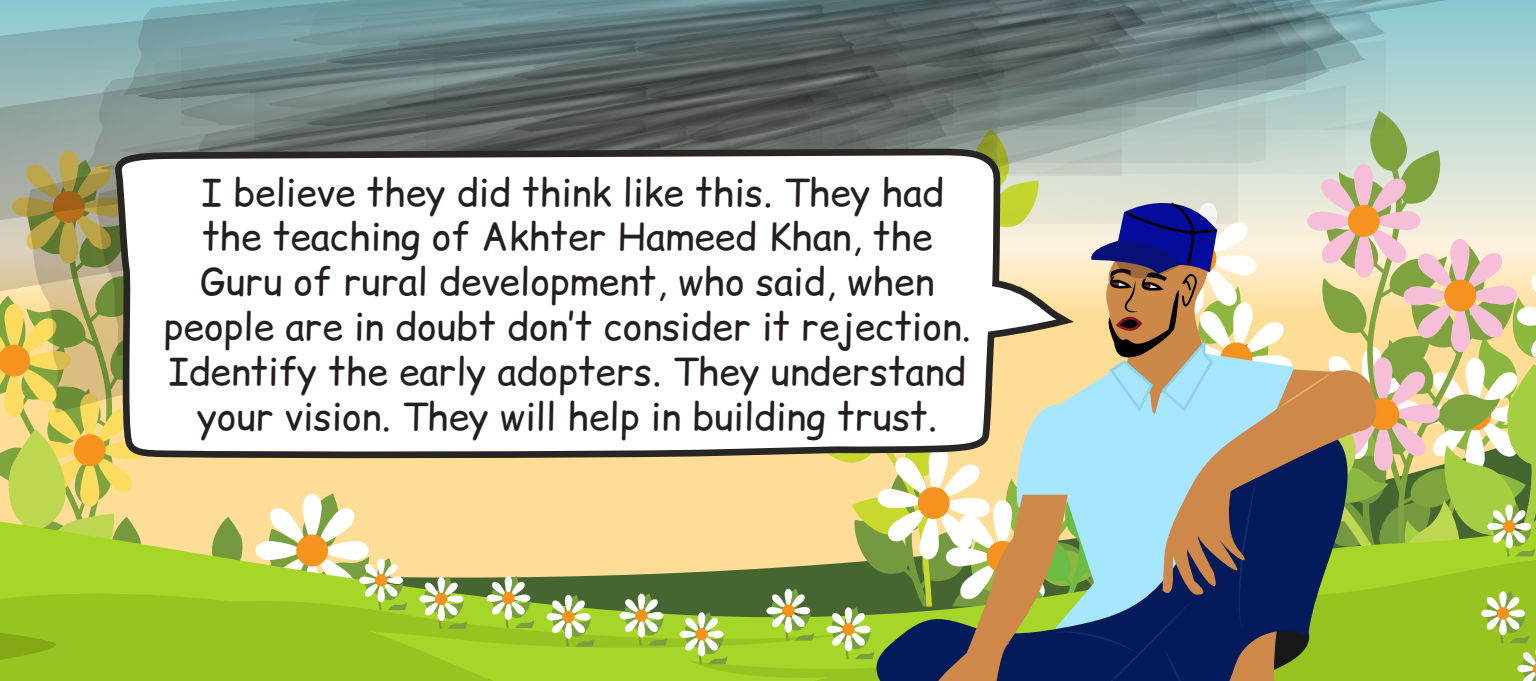
I suspect they didn't trust the outsider's intentions.



You are right! It takes time to build trust. They had doubts about the sincerity of SRSO's work.



I hope the SRSO team knew what an Italian expert, Ernesto Sirotti suggests... "if you want to help, shut up and listen". Also how the American Tennis Legend Arthur Ashe put it... "start where you are, use what you have, do what you can".



I believe they did think like this. They had the teaching of Akhter Hameed Khan, the Guru of rural development, who said, when people are in doubt don't consider it rejection. Identify the early adopters. They understand your vision. They will help in building trust.



Ah! So it was the perfect timing for Mahnaz to become open to their work I suspect! They were able to reach her?

Yes. Mahnaz used to teach the Quran in her home. One of her students informed her about the arrival of the team, so she invited the team to her home for the first meeting.


So Mahnaz became their first early adopter, hurray!





Yes, but she had to pay a price for that. Mahnaz's family, friends, and people in the village all started pointing fingers at Mahnaz, but she stood firm. She succeeded in forming a group of 9 women to work with SRSO.

Did Mahnaz understand the conditions of partnering with the SRSO?

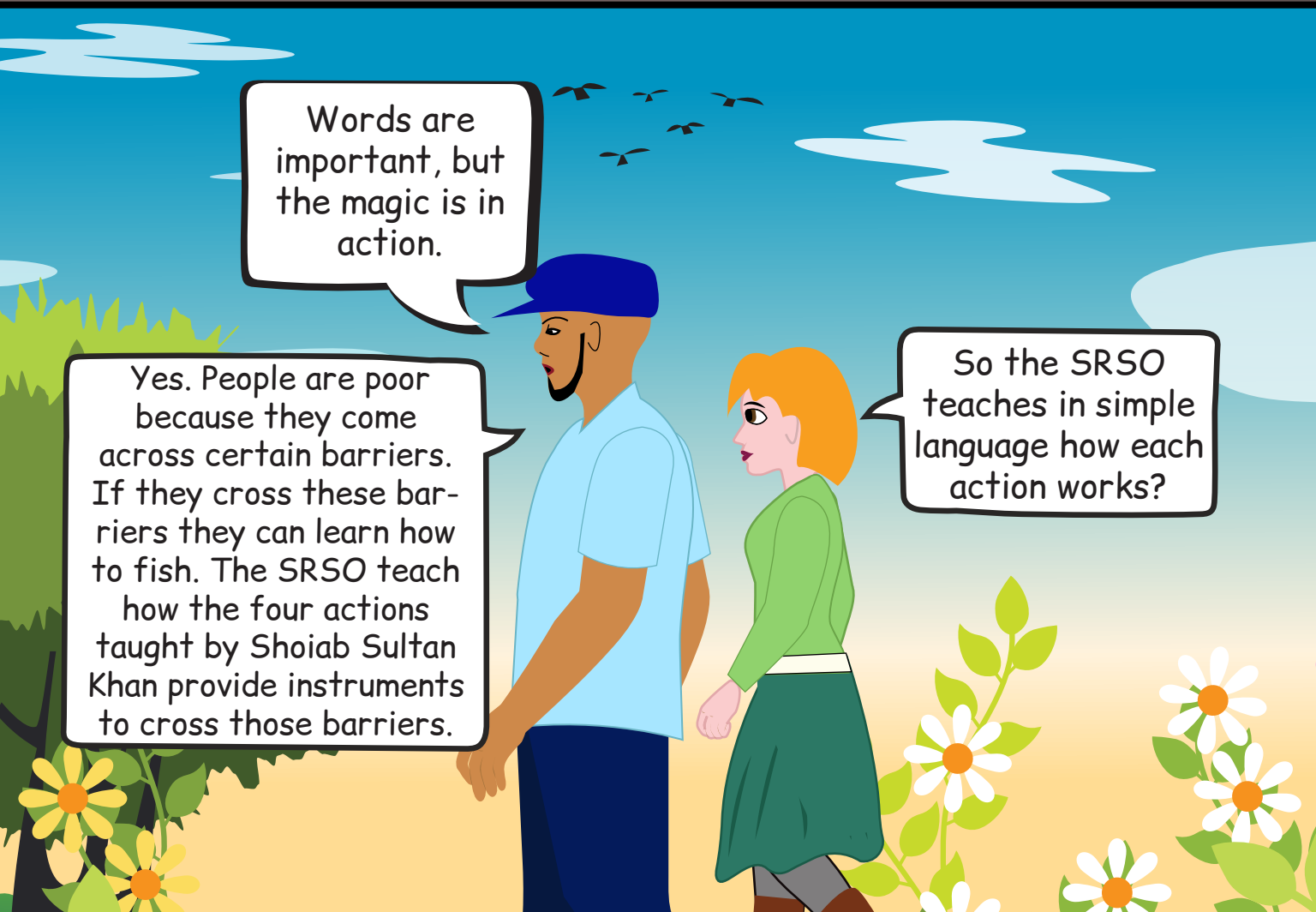
A man and a woman are walking together in a lush green field. The man is on the left, wearing a blue cap, a light blue t-shirt, and dark blue trousers. The woman is on the right, wearing a green long-sleeved top, a dark green skirt, and brown boots. They are walking towards the right. In the background, there are yellow and white flowers. In the foreground, there is a pond with a reflection of the man and woman. The sky is blue with white clouds.

Yes. In the first meeting at her home, they shared that SRSO's mentor Shoaib Sultan Khan believed that women need to fulfill four conditions to alleviate poverty, to learn how to fish, so to speak.

Willingness to end poverty, organize, save, and learn new skills

What are those four conditions?

I can truly understand Mahnaz's willingness to end her poverty, out of her tragic loss. The four conditions sound like magic though, don't they?



Words are important, but the magic is in action.

Yes. People are poor because they come across certain barriers. If they cross these barriers they can learn how to fish. The SRSO teach how the four actions taught by Shoiab Sultan Khan provide instruments to cross those barriers.

So the SRSO teaches in simple language how each action works?



As Bruce Lee once said,

become water and you can cross all the barriers.

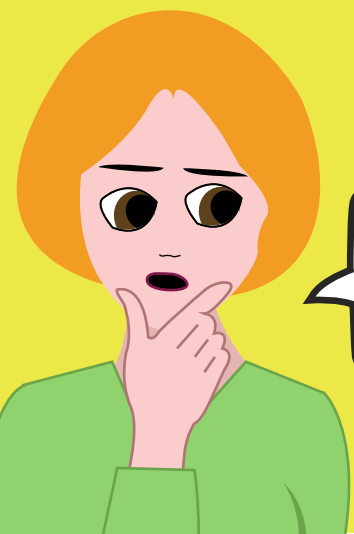
"Be like water making its way through cracks. Do not be assertive, but adjust to the object, and you shall find a way around or through it. If nothing within you stays rigid, outward things will disclose themselves".

I love that quote, very apt to the lush Indus valley of the Sindh province as well, and to its very spiritual people who love their land so much!

Yes, and flexibility is the key. If we want to change the world, we have to start by changing ourselves.

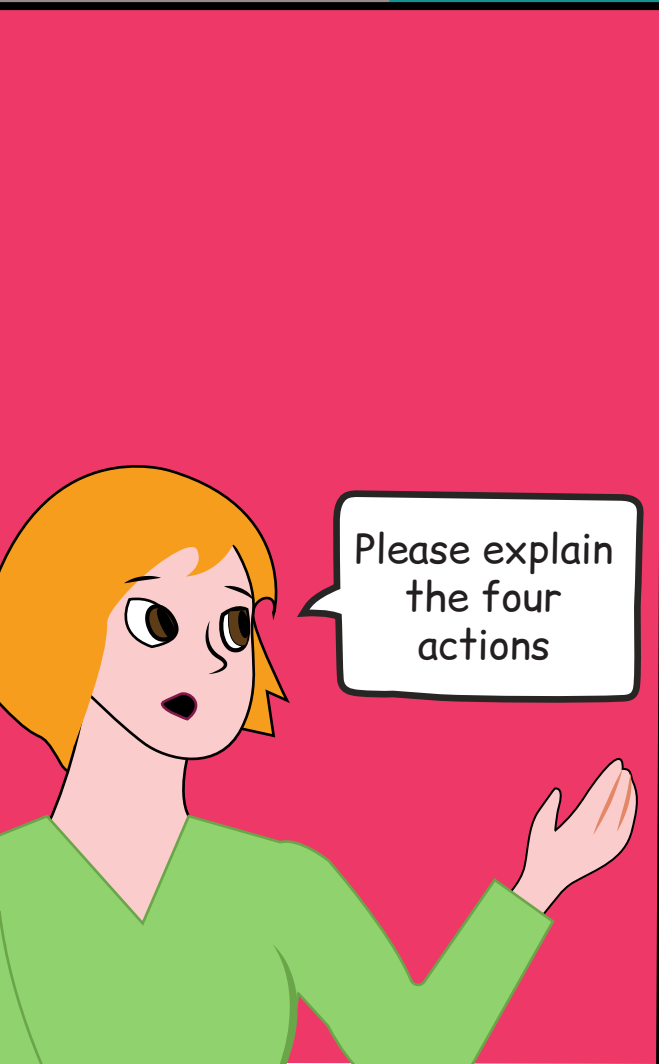


That is so simple. Why don't people understand it?



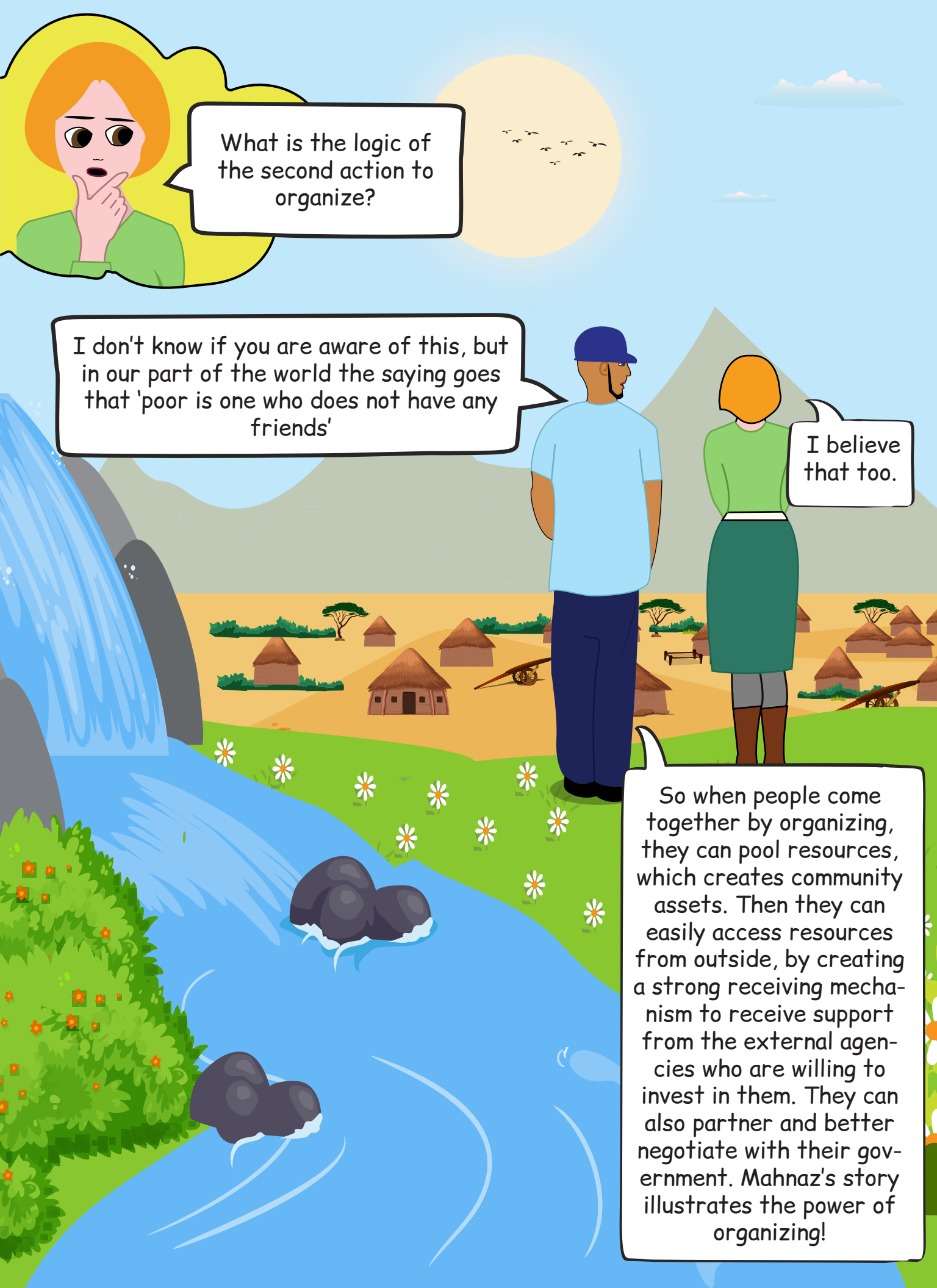
The problem is not with the people, it is with 'me'. When I change, the world around me will change, and the four actions are the path to the new world.





The poor have a psychological barrier. They believe they cannot overcome their poverty. It is based on their experience. They first need to announce their decision to remove their poverty. Once they say it to themselves and others, they overcome their psychological barrier. So they psychologically resolve; I can and want to overcome my poverty. I will not ask for a fish, but learn how to fish. I can do it.






What is the logic of the second action to organize?

I don't know if you are aware of this, but in our part of the world the saying goes that 'poor is one who does not have any friends'

I believe that too.


So when people come together by organizing, they can pool resources, which creates community assets. Then they can easily access resources from outside, by creating a strong receiving mechanism to receive support from the external agencies who are willing to invest in them. They can also partner and better negotiate with their government. Mahnaz's story illustrates the power of organizing!



Now we come to the third action about savings. Many people ask, how can the poor save? If they can save, they won't be poor anymore.





Our teacher Akhter Hameed Khan told us to know the difference between the poor and the destitute. The poor are not penniless. They can earn and save, but they don't know the power of their savings. They can use their collective savings as collateral, and be credit worthy for dealing with the banks.



It solves the "access" problem highlighted by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen.

Savings can also be used to lend to the families whose bread winner gets sick. Otherwise the family would have to sell their assets and borrow from blood sucking money lenders. A community loan gives them a cushion against the sharks.

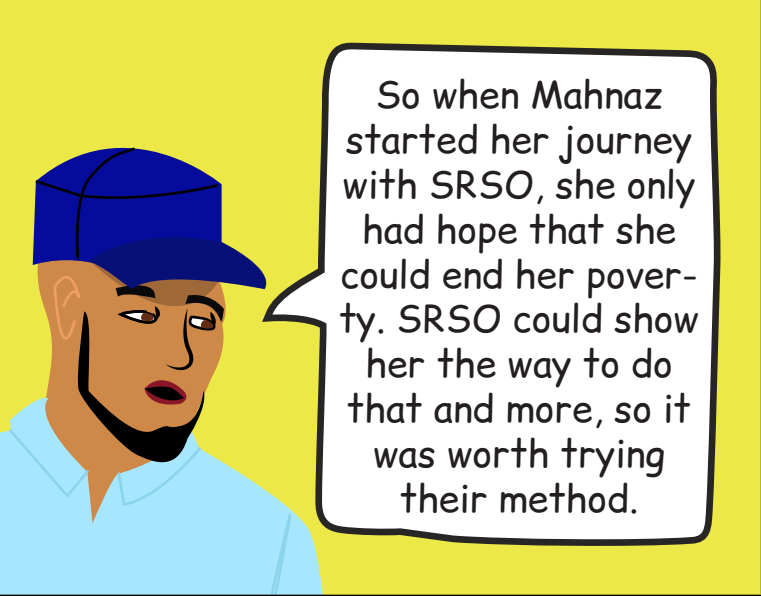




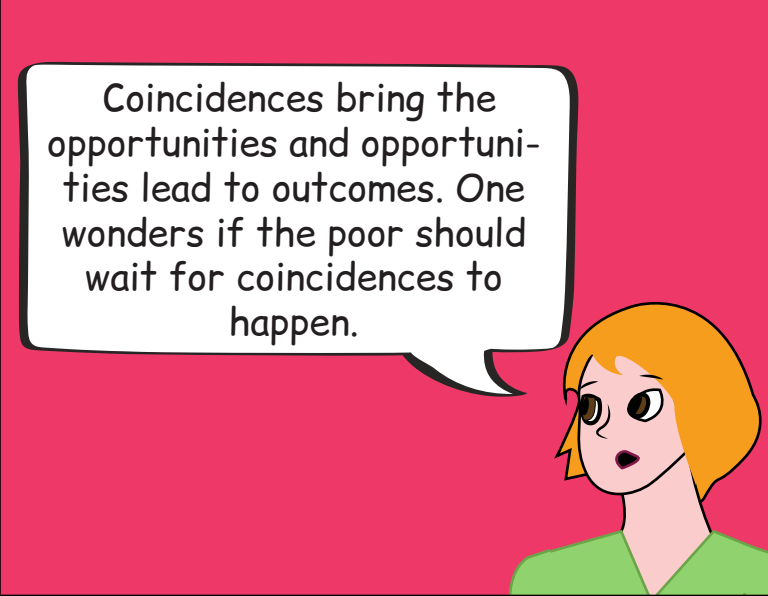
Which brings us to the fourth action of learning new skills, which is a powerful way to increase the income of the poor.

Can you explain?

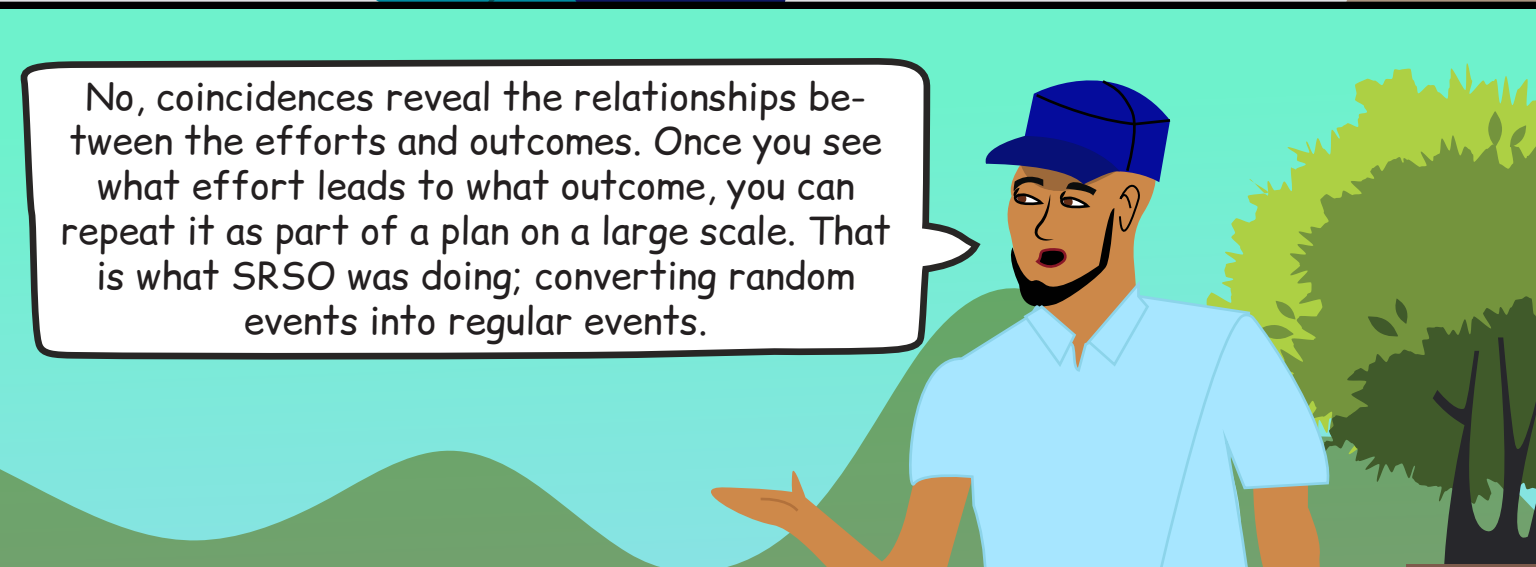
According to the World Bank expert Suhail Jehangir Malik, there is 1 extension worker for 70,000 farmers in the richest province of Pakistan to teach them new skills in agriculture and live-stock. The government cannot cope with this challenge. When communities get organized, they can learn quickly on a large scale. They learn from copying others and then teaching others.



So when Mahnaz started her journey with SRSO, she only had hope that she could end her poverty. SRSO could show her the way to do that and more, so it was worth trying their method.



Coincidences bring the opportunities and opportunities lead to outcomes. One wonders if the poor should wait for coincidences to happen.

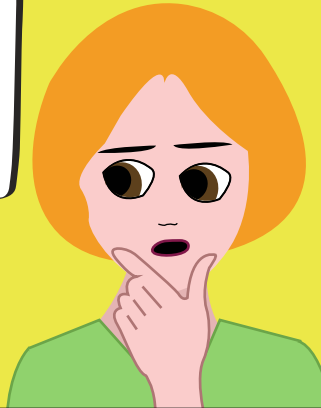


No, coincidences reveal the relationships between the efforts and outcomes. Once you see what effort leads to what outcome, you can repeat it as part of a plan on a large scale. That is what SRSO was doing; converting random events into regular events.



If I sum up Mahnaz's secret in one word, it is solidarity.

How solidarity helped Mahnaz move from poverty to prosperity?

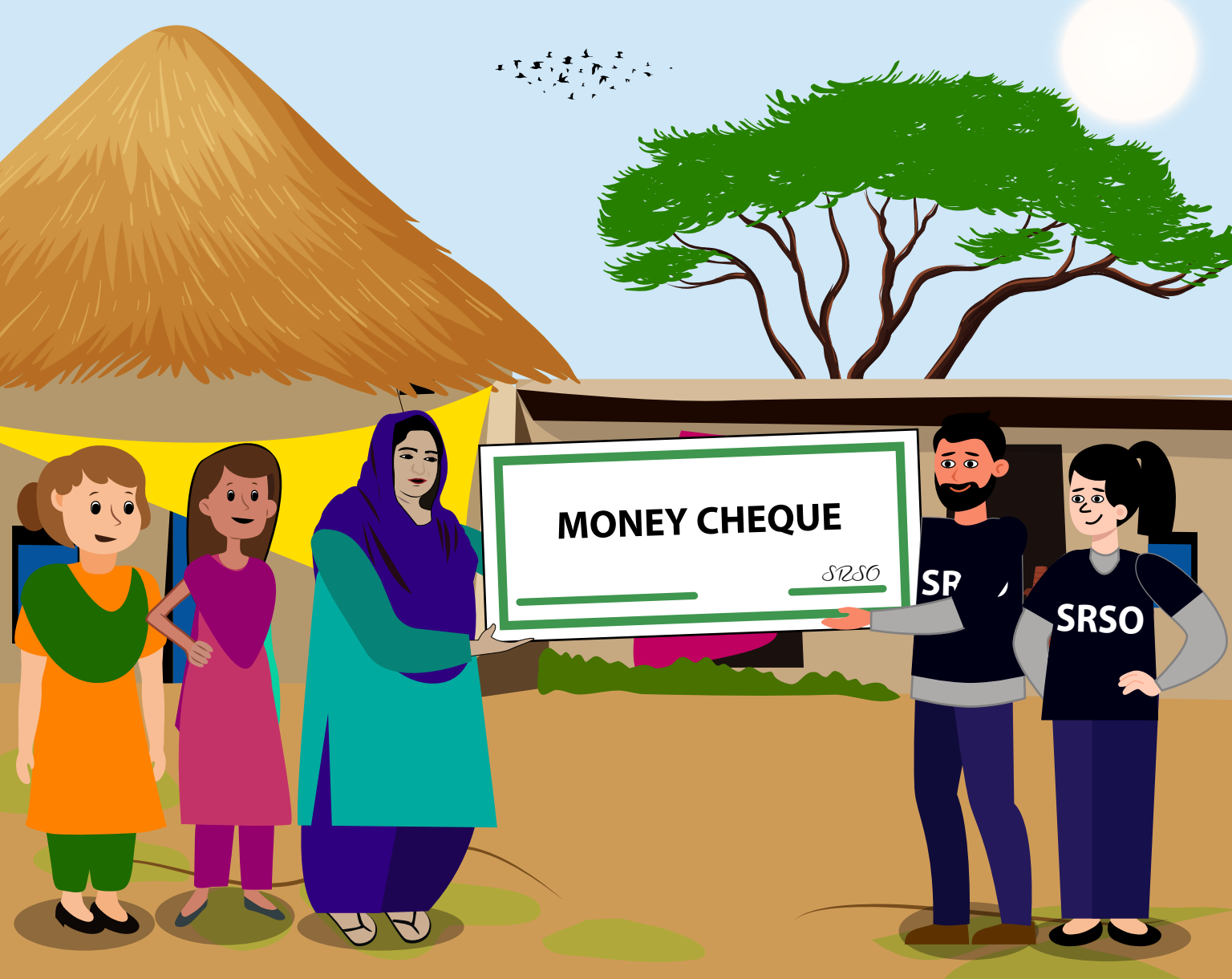


Yes. Mahnaz invited other poor women to join the local women's organization. In the beginning there were just 9 women, but their network expanded to 180 women!

Each woman started by saving Rs.100 per month. They also started working on the health and cleanliness of the village

These actions proved that they met the conditions of partnership with SRSO.





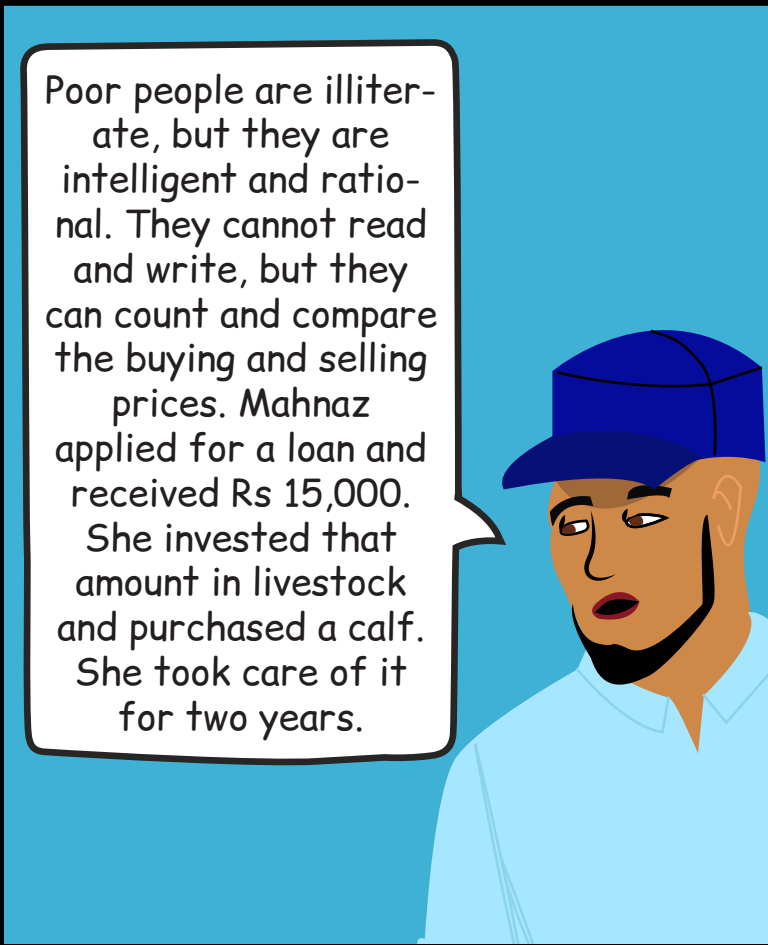
Please describe how organization and saving changed Mahnaz's situation?

Happily! The SRCO approved a community investment fund for the Women organization (WO) that she initiated. They provided Rs. 1,580,000 to the WO, stipulating it could be used to provide Rs. 300,000 as an income generation grant to individual members.

These income generation grants were like the fishing rod. Fishing meant using the money in such a way that the loan recipient generated more money than the loan received.



So now Mahnaz was given a loan to start fishing in the pond, so to speak. But she was an uneducated woman with no business experience...



Poor people are illiterate, but they are intelligent and rational. They cannot read and write, but they can count and compare the buying and selling prices. Mahnaz applied for a loan and received Rs 15,000. She invested that amount in livestock and purchased a calf. She took care of it for two years.









A livestock vaccinator was available locally, and access to the vaccinator broke the skill barrier. After that she sold the animal for Rs. 200,000. With that money she purchased another calf and the rest of the amount she invested in agriculture. Mahnaz earned a profit more than 10 times the amount of her loan!

That is truly amazing!





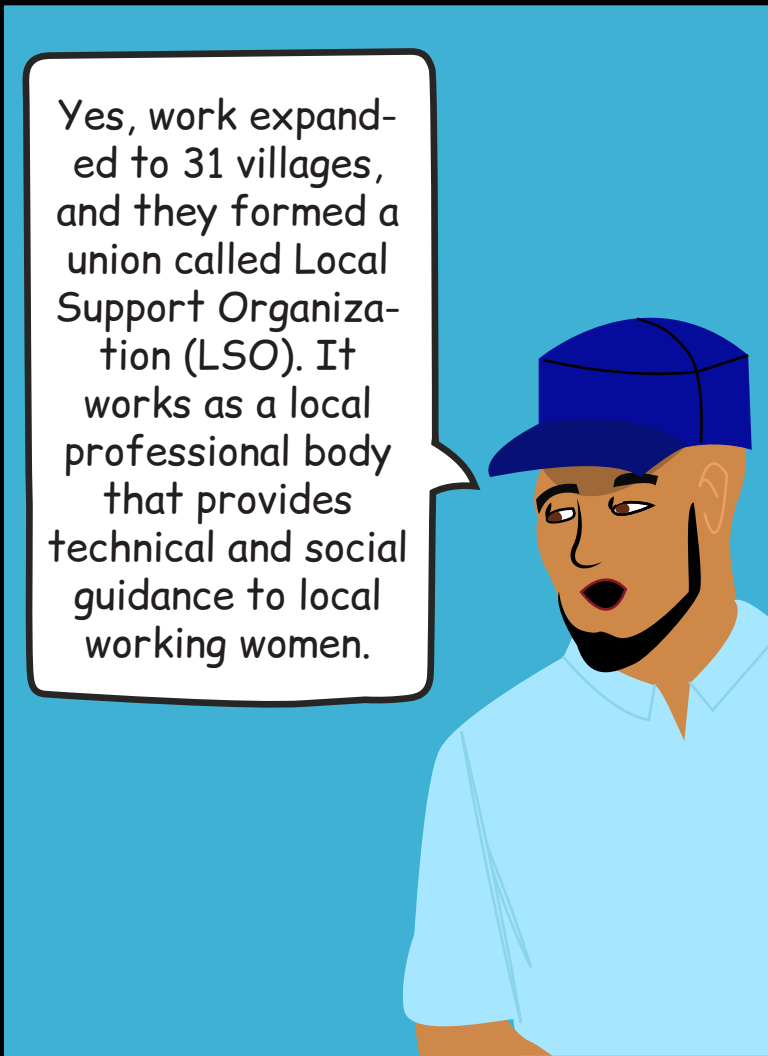
A woman who could not afford to pay Rs. 300 for her son's life-saving treatment now had an asset worth Rs. 200,000. Isn't it unreal?

It is amazing it can happen so easily, but why doesn't it happen more often?

Poor people learn from things they see on the ground, not from textbooks. Once they see a local success, they are willing to trust. Then there is a snowball effect!



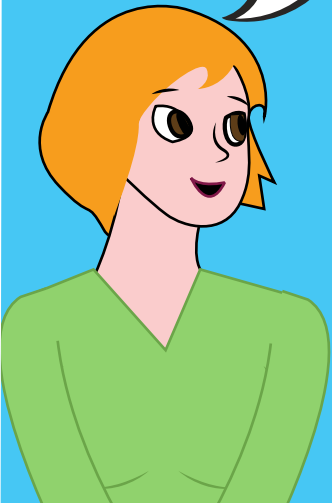
Surely it was not Mahnaz alone. There was a snowball effect also.



Yes, work expanded to 31 villages, and they formed a union called Local Support Organization (LSO). It works as a local professional body that provides technical and social guidance to local working women.



I am delighted to hear how women who were formerly traditionally segregated from men achieved such independence!



Customs change when new experiments succeed!



Yes, through community workers who didn't give up when met with resistance. They behaved like water that takes the form of the pot it is poured into, by adapting to the local situation.



So the work did not stop there. There was one school in Mahnaz's village. One day the LSO organized a meeting with the school headmaster, together with the SRSO team District Manager. It came to light that no teachers were coming to school. When they approached the teachers, their excuse was that no students were coming to the school. So the LSO and SRSO talked with the villagers to send their children to school, since education is very important for them. Then their children could also become doctors or engineers, or any kind of professional.



This was another snowball effect!



True! Let me finish the story with another Chinese proverb,

"A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step".

Mahnaz decided she would not remain in poverty!



“The wound is tunnel to the light.”
~ Rumi

